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ABSTRACT

The New Jersey State Departments of Education and Human Services propose a Governor's Urban Prekindergarten Initiative that will significantly increase opportunities for prekindergarten education through pilot programs in urban communities. The proposed program targets three- and four-year olds who are eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Objectives are the following: (1) follow effective practices; (2) teach basic educational and personal-social skills; (3) provide child care before and after sessions; and (4) involve parents. Districts will apply through a competitive grant process. The program comprises the following approaches: (1) a program operated in three sites by the local Board of Education supervised by the Department of Education; and (2) a program operated in the public schools of two or three local districts by a Head Start program supervised by the Department of Human Services. The Departments of Education and Human Services will provide the following services: (1) funding and consultation; (2) implementation guidelines; (3) interagency policy and planning; (4) supervision; (5) evaluation; and (6) report on program outcomes. The program will cost approximately $10 million annually for three years, subject to cost of living adjustments. A brief summary of relevant research, a plan of action, and a list of 10 questions and answers about the program are included. An 11-item bibliography is appended. (FMW)

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Prekindergarten for Urban Children: A Pilot Program in New Jersey

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Prekindergarten for Urban Children: A Pilot Program in New Jersey

Despite intensive, costly state and local efforts to improve education, some students seem not to benefit. A look at their school records shows persistent learning problems, often from the outset of their school experience. As they continue in school, those youngsters fail to keep up, to find satisfaction in learning, to build self-confidence, and to meet graduation requirements. Their chances for success in adult work, social interaction, and citizenship responsibilities are impaired, with unfortunate results for all.

STATEMENT OF NEED

Most of these students live in our urban areas and come from backgrounds of poverty. Urban living conditions make particularly high demands on families with meager resources. Many impoverished young children arrive at kindergarten and first grade underdeveloped for lack of some experiences and skills that are critical to school success.

An estimated 46,000 three- and four-year-old New Jersey children live in families subsisting below the federal poverty level (e.g., $11,200 annual income for a family of four in 1987), and most of them are in urban areas. These children are less likely than others to attend a preschool educational program. They are less likely to enter school prepared to succeed. They are more likely to fail in school and drop out before graduating. Special help given to them earlier could reduce their risk of failure. Yet, for various reasons, many urban districts have not given that help.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Many educators and parents believe that good preschool programs can foster healthy intellectual and social growth in young children and offset disadvantages due to poverty or restricted learning opportunities. Recently, research has examined the question: Can preschool programs help young children succeed in school, both academically and socially? The research base is not uniformly strong for all young children, but there are clear indications that well-designed and managed preschool programs can have important, lasting benefits, especially for the children who are at greatest risk of early difficulty in school. These studies suggest that impoverished young children who participate in such programs will differ from similar children who do not by:

- demonstrating higher achievement in reading and math through primary grades and beyond (Cataldo, 1977; Lazar, et al., 1982; Maryland State Board of Education, 1985; Pierson, et al., 1984);

- having fewer assignments to remedial classes or repetition of a grade (Berreuta-Clement, et al., 1984; Deutsch, et al., 1985; Irvine, 1982; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980); and

- displaying higher self-esteem and more favorable attitudes toward school (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986; Irvine, 1982; Lazar, et al., 1982).

When young children achieve in basic educational skills, feel pride in their progress, and show enthusiasm for school, they are unlikely to need to repeat a grade or take remedial classes. The cost-effectiveness resulting from eliminating those expensive options is further multiplied when these children later show lower rates of juvenile delinquency, adolescent pregnancy, welfare dependency, and unemployment (Deutsch, et al., 1985; Gray, et al., 1983; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980, 1986).

WHAT OTHER STATES ARE DOING

Recognizing the contribution good early childhood programs can make to their own educational problems and needs, many states have developed legislation or initiated pilot programs during the last few years (Grubb, 1987). Most of these programs are for young children at risk of later academic failure (Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas) or unready to begin school on an equal footing with others (Delaware, South Carolina).

California and New York State have long provided state-funded prekindergarten programs, and a few states support local district programs for four-year-olds through the regular state aid process (New Jersey*, Pennsylvania). In addition, a few states offer parent education for parents of young children (Minnesota, Missouri).

State action in preschool education has been encouraged by the National Governors Association, the National Association of State Legislatures, the Education Commission of the States, and national associations of professional educators.

WHAT IS CURRENTLY HAPPENING IN NEW JERSEY

An array of preschool programs is available in our state, as these brief descriptions show:

* Present statute and regulations allow children as young as four years of age to be enrolled in kindergarten and funded by state aid.

- Head Start, a 22-year-old federal program, promotes the intellectual, physical, and social development of young poor children and the involvement of their parents. Local programs in the 21 counties serve 9,700 three- and four-year-olds in all (i.e., only 21 percent of the estimated 46,000 eligible children whose family incomes are below the federal poverty level), at a cost of $30.6 million in federal funds (FFY 1987 data).

- Publicly funded child care is administered by the Department of Human Services, Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), for the primary purpose of meeting the child care needs of working families whose incomes meet eligibility standards (i.e., no more than 80 percent of the 1983 New Jersey median income based upon family size). Approximately 9,000 three- to five-year-olds are served in center-based programs which provide care and early childhood education, subsidized by federal, state, and local funds, with a sliding scale of parents' fees based on income. The public funds devoted to care of three- to five-year-olds are not calculated separately, but are included in the totals of $13.5 million federal and $15.2 million state funds for centers for all the children birth to school-age.

  A modest new (FY 1988) state program gives $1 million to existing Head Start or Head Start-like programs (most of which operate on half-day schedules) to extend their hours for working parents and $2 million to child care programs to expand enrollment.

- Private sector nursery schools and preschool child care centers enroll large numbers of two-and-one-half to six-year-olds. (Enrollment figures for three- to five-year-olds are not kept separately.) With few exceptions, they operate on parents' fees, which average $57 weekly statewide. Objectives and program activities vary program by program, resulting in differing emphases on custodial care, preschool education, and other program components.

All these programs must comply with the DYFS child care center licensing requirements, which emphasize health, safety, and age-appropriate play and learning activities for children. Classroom staff in small programs (fewer than 31 children) may be paraprofessionals, rather than certified teachers. Liaison with receiving schools for the purpose of a coordinated educational program is optional.

Public school districts may enroll four-year-olds in classes meeting code requirements for kindergarten and receive state aid for those children. Last year, 72 public school districts in 15 counties enrolled 5,800 four-year-olds, almost all in half-day sessions, at an estimated $7 million in state equalization aid. Additional program costs are borne by the school districts. Curriculum, instruction, and pupil outcomes are locally decided and show considerable variation.

Among the current programs, there are wide differences in quality, goals and objectives, duration, staff preparation, and relationship to school kindergarten and primary programs. Many children face barriers in gaining

access: there are not enough programs; they are not distributed evenly throughout the state; some have strict eligibility requirements or charge fees beyond the reach of many families. Because few evaluation studies are available, we know little about outcomes of the programs. Moreover, there are no systematic linkages between prekindergarten programs and the public schools which receive the children, leaving issues of program consistency and continuity to chance.

PROPOSED PREKINDERGARTEN INITIATIVE

In response to Governor Kean's direction, the state departments of Education and Human Services propose a Governor's Urban Prekindergarten Initiative that will significantly increase opportunities for prekindergarten education through pilot programs in urban communities in our state. It will be available to children who cannot now attend programs, even though they may most need them. Its ingredients will be those that research has shown to be effective. The proposed program is outlined below.

Objectives. Through the proposed initiative, local urban districts with the most impoverished three- and four-year-olds (e.g., eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children) will be able to help them develop intellectual and social readiness for school. The local prekindergartens will:

- follow patterns that research, demonstration, and evaluation have found to be effective;
- provide learning experiences through which young preschool children learn basic educational and personal-social skills most efficiently;
- provide child care before/after prekindergarten sessions for needy children whose parents are employed or in training (services to be subsidized, according to an income-based sliding fee scale.); and
- involve parents responsibly in the education of their children from the earliest years of school.

Design of the Program. Urban districts will apply through a competitive grant process, demonstrating their ability and commitment to a program of high quality, consistent with guidelines jointly developed by the two departments. Priority will go to five to six districts with high percentages of students who are economically disadvantaged and/or deficient in basic intellectual and social skills.

One of two approaches will be used to deliver school-based programs and services to approximately 1,150 three-year-olds and 1,150 four-year-olds in approximately 140 classrooms, as follows:

1. In three sites, a prekindergarten program will be sponsored by the local board of education, with the necessary before- and after-school care also operated by the board or by a provider under board contract. The Department of Education will be responsible for these sites.

2. In two or three sites (to be determined by funding considerations) a Head Start program will operate both the prekindergarten and the necessary child care in public schools. Grants for these programs will be based upon a joint application from the local board and Head Start, and management may reside in either the school or the Head Start program. These sites will be under the overall direction of the Department of Human Services.

The local programs will operate under a common set of research-based guidelines, requiring that participating districts:

- identify their neediest three- and four-year-olds;
- provide appropriate curriculum and instruction in small, full school-day classes (i.e., approximately 5-6 hours) with careful attention to the children's individual needs, interests, and strengths;
- use trained and experienced early childhood educators and give them quality supervision and staff development
- coordinate the prekindergarten with the regular school program so that children's learning is closely monitored, linked to prior achievement and expectations, and continuous, year by year;
- involve parents through identified roles, responsibilities, education, and training;
- provide or facilitate access to health and social services and before- and after-school care for the estimated 1,150 children who need those services; and
- cooperate in the departments' monitoring and evaluation processes.

Role of the Departments of Education and Human Services. The departments will: 1) provide assistance to selected districts through funding and consultation; 2) establish guidelines for implementation; 3) initiate interagency processes for policy and planning regarding such issues as program guidelines and standards; 4) monitor and maintain the program guidelines; 5) carry out an evaluation study; and 6) report on program outcomes.

To give guidance to the cooperative, coordinated approach represented in this initiative, the departments will enter into a formal interagency agreement and establish a management team to resolve issues which cross traditional agency responsibilities and jurisdictions. The primary mission of the management team will be to assure effective and efficient planning and

implementation, assure program quality, and build the new program into the existing network of early childhood education in the state.

Evaluation. To assure the quality of the program and assess its effects, the departments will:

- continuously monitor district compliance with the pilot program guidelines and with licensing and contract standards, where applicable;
- assess the children's intellectual and social readiness at entry into kindergarten; and
- compare the children with similar children from non-participating districts on academic achievement and school progress in later years.

Because the program is costly and its objectives so critical, the guidelines for program development and operation will be specified and required. Refunding year by year will depend upon full compliance and quality of implementation. An evaluation study, utilizing external evaluators, will determine the impact of the pilot program and provide the basis for recommendations to modify and/or extend the initiative beyond the five-year pilot period.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Children in the program are expected to differ from similar non-participating children by demonstrating:

- better preparation in basic educational and personal-social skills for kindergarten entry;
- higher rates of academic achievement in primary grades and later years;
- better attendance records in primary grades and later years;
- higher self-confidence in academic and social skills;
- more interest and enthusiasm in schoolwork; and
- more involvement and support from their parents.

The proposed program will add to the resources New Jersey offers to families and their children to build the competence and skills necessary for a responsible, independent present and future. Our program is not designed to compete with other good programs, but rather to complement them and to expand the educational opportunities available to three- and four-year-olds. To coordinate local programs developed under this initiative effectively with other existing community-based programs and to improve preschool education in

general, a council representing other state agencies and service providers will be convened. Existing state advisory groups (e.g., State Child Advisory Committee) will be approached for review and comment, as appropriate.

The prekindergarten pilot program proposed is firmly supported by theory, research, and effective practice. Like Head Start and publicly funded child care, it is for children whose families have limited incomes; and like other early childhood programs, it is voluntary. It differs from current programs, however, by combining in one program these important ingredients:

- It will involve the young children most at risk of early school failure.
- It will be convenient and accessible to urban children who need it at no cost to their parents.
- It will integrate prekindergarten experiences of children into their continuing elementary education.
- It will include the comprehensive educational, social, and health services which help young children overcome early problems and thrive.
- It will involve parents responsibly in their children's education.
- It will be monitored carefully on standards of quality.
- It will be thoroughly evaluated to assess its outcomes, thus providing a basis for future decisions about prekindergarten education.

An interim summative evaluation study will be completed in January, 1992, as a basis for preliminary policy recommendations.

At the end of the first five years of implementation of the pilot program, the departments will submit a report and recommendations concerning continuation or alteration, based upon the evaluation study.

BUDGETARY REQUIREMENTS

The pilot program will cost approximately $10 million annually for three years, subject to cost of living adjustments. These estimates include all local program-related costs, except for those pertaining to facilities and transportation, for 1,150 three-year-olds and the same number of four-year-olds in five to six urban districts; the administrative costs of the two departments; and supplementary grants to participating districts to provide before- and after-school care for those young children who demonstrate need for it. Participating local districts are expected to assume any costs for facilities and transporta- tion. In addition, planning grants totaling $100,000 will be awarded to participating districts during the year prior to initiation of the prekindergarten classes.

PLAN OF ACTION

Action Step	Completed by
1. Interagency management initiated	February, 1988
2. Advisory committee established	May, 1988
3. Program guidelines and application procedures developed	June, 1988
4. Participating districts selected	October, 1988
5. Planning grants awarded	December, 1988
6. Consultation and planning assistance provided to participating districts	February-June, 1989
7. Cooperating districts selected for comparison groups (for evaluation study)	March, 1989
8. Initial program resources identified and developed	June, 1989
9. Classroom implementation initiated (repeated annually)	
-- Screening, assessment of children	August, 1989
-- Program initiation in all classes	September, 1989
10. Monitoring initiated (repeated annually)	November, 1989
11. Collection of assessment data for evaluation study initiated (repeated annually)	June, 1990
12. Interim summative evaluation and preliminary policy recommendations	January, 1992
13. Summative evaluation, report, and recommendations presented	December, 1992

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Prekindergarten for Urban Children: A Pilot Program in New Jersey

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WHY HAS THE GOVERNOR ANNOUNCED THIS INITIATIVE?

Intensive state and local efforts have been directed to educational improvement for a number of years. Progress has been made, but some students continue to have early and continuing learning problems. Continuing difficulty and failure may gradually overwhelm them and erode their interest in school achievement. Tragically, many of them ultimately fail to meet graduation requirements, sustaining serious blows to their chances for success in adult work and responsibilities.

Some 46,000 of our three- and four-year olds live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, most of them in urban areas. Growing up in an urban family with meager resources deprives many of these children of the backgrounds they need to enter school prepared to succeed. They are more likely to fail and ultimately drop out before graduation.

Children like these have been helped along the road to academic and social success by the enriching experiences of a preschool educational program. Yet these children are much less likely to attend a preschool program than are children of more affluent families.

Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, Governor Thomas Kean has announced a new initiative addressed to 1) identifying young children at risk of persistent difficulty in school and 2) giving them the help they need early in their school experience.

Much research has indicated that children with preschool experience demonstrate higher achievement in basic skills in the primary grades. However, how to sustain this achievement, as well as how to implement these programs more widely requires further study. This initiative will be an opportunity both to serve the needs of this population and to study the implementation of effective programs in order to sustain higher academic achievement.

WHAT IS THE PROGRAM?

The urban prekindergarten initiative will provide a three-year pilot program of effective prekindergarten education to selected three- and four-year-olds in urban school districts, through classes and services based in the public schools and administered by the local board of education or, through a joint application, by a Head Start program.

The program will include the following features:

- appropriate curriculum and instruction in small, full-day classes, with ample individual attention;
- experienced, competent teachers, together with adequate supervision and opportunities for staff development;
- coordination with the regular school program so that children's progress is closely monitored and continuous, year by year;
- active parental involvement; and
- access to health and social services, including before- and after-school care (subsidized, based on a sliding fee scale) for those children who need it.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM?

The purpose of the program is to help three- and four-year old urban children from impoverished families develop intellectual and social readiness for school. The pilot program will be implemented through alternative delivery systems and evaluated to determine the relative effectiveness of the differing approaches.

The initiative will provide guidance and funding for programs that will:

- follow patterns of curriculum and instruction with demonstrated effectiveness;
- provide learning opportunities through which young children will develop desirable personal-social and academic skills;
- make available extended child care (before- and after-school care for needy children whose parents are employed or in training); and
- involve parents responsibly in the education of their children from the earliest years of school.

WHAT WILL THE PROGRAM ACCOMPLISH?

Good preschool programs can foster healthy intellectual and social growth in young children and offset disadvantages caused by poverty or restricted learning opportunities. Moreover, well-designed preschool programs can increase the chances many of these children have to succeed academically and socially and reduce their risk of school failure.

Studies have shown that poor urban children who have participated in good preschool programs demonstrate higher self-esteem, greater enthusiasm for school, and higher achievement in academic skills, such as reading and math, than similar children who have not been in those programs.

Preschool programs can be cost-effective as well. When students achieve in basic educational skills and feel positive about school experiences, they are unlikely to have to repeat a grade or take remedial classes. Over time, there is a build-up of benefits, with success breeding more success. Participation in a preschool program is associated with lower rates of juvenile delinquency, adolescent pregnancy, welfare dependency, and unemployment.

WHICH CHILDREN WILL BE SERVED BY THIS PROGRAM?

The program will serve approximately 2,300 children in five to six urban school districts, in approximately 140 classrooms with the neediest three- and four-year olds. Priorities for selection of the participating districts will be based on the numbers of low-income families, the predicted academic and social needs of the young children, and the numbers who do not have access to a preschool program. Districts finally selected to participate will have demonstrated commitment to a program of high quality and capability to provide the additional resources (i.e., facilities, staff support, etc.).

Participating districts will offer the programs to the three- and four-year-olds most at risk of early and continuing social and academic problems in school.

HOW WILL THE PROGRAM DIFFER FROM EXISTING PROGRAMS?

An array of preschool programs is available in New Jersey, as follows:

- Head Start, a federal program to promote the intellectual, physical, and social development of young poor children and the involvement of their parents.

  Head Start program enrollment in New Jersey is limited to approximately 9,700 three- and four-year-olds although 46,000 are eligible.

- Publicly subsidized child care, offered to eligible children for the primary purpose of meeting the child care needs of poor working families.

  Approximately 9,000 three- to five-year-olds are in child care center programs, which are funded with combinations of federal, state, and local money and parents' fees, adjusted according to their incomes.

- Private sector nursery schools and preschool child care centers, operated on client fees.

  These programs enroll large numbers of preschool children whose families can afford the fees, which average $57 per week statewide.

- Public school prekindergarten programs, which may enroll four-year-olds and receive state equalization aid for them.

  Currently, 78 local school districts offer prekindergartens to 5,917 four-year-olds.

Among these programs, there are wide differences in goals and objectives, duration, quality of staff and curricula, and relationships to the kindergarten and primary programs which follow. There is a dearth of evaluation studies to let us know their outcomes.

Great numbers of children do not have access to preschool programs since there are not enough programs, they are not evenly located throughout the state, and they have eligibility requirements that many children cannot meet or fees that their families cannot pay.

The urban prekindergarten program **will differ from existing programs** by incorporating the following procedures systematically in a pilot test:

- enrolling the neediest urban youngsters at no financial cost to their parents;
- requiring that participating districts maintain the characteristics which are associated with effective prekindergarten programs;
- requiring that there is a pre-school through grade 6 coordinated curriculum;
- continually monitoring the quality of local implementation; and
- evaluating the outcomes of the program and disseminating results.

HOW WILL PROGRAM QUALITY BE ASSURED?

The departments will develop guidelines, based on research and effective practice, and require districts to demonstrate their ability and commitment to carry out a program of high quality that is consistent with those guidelines.

To assure the quality of the program and assess its effects, the departments will:

- monitor district compliance with the pilot program guidelines continuously;

- assess the children's intellectual and social readiness at entry into kindergarten; and

- compare the children with similar children from non-participating school districts on academic achievement and school progress in later years.

Because the program is costly and its objectives are critical, the guidelines for program development and operation will be specified and required. Refunding year by year during the three-year pilot program will depend upon full compliance and quality of implementation. A final evaluation study will determine the impact of the program and provide the basis for recommendations to extend or modify it.

WHAT WILL THE PROGRAM COST?

The program will cost an estimated $10,000,000 for each of the three years. Included in the cost estimates are: costs of staff, materials, and all other classroom-related costs for 1,150 three-year-olds and an equal number of four-year-olds; the administrative expenses of the two departments; and the cost of a supplementary grant program for before- and after-school child care for approximately half (or 1,150) of the children of working parents who need such services. These funds do not include costs for facilities or transportation, which must be undertaken by the participating districts as an in-kind contribution. Planning grants totalling $100,000 will be awarded to the participating districts prior to the three years of implementation.

WHEN WILL THE PROGRAM BEGIN AND WHEN WILL IT END?

The departments expect to give planning grants to the five to six selected districts during the 1988-89 school year. They will begin the local programs the following year. Highlights of the schedule are shown below.

Activity	Timeline
Interagency management initiated	February, 1988
Advisory committee established	May, 1988
Program guidelines and application procedures developed	June, 1988
Participating districts selected	October, 1988
Planning grants awarded	December, 1988
Planning assistance provided to participating districts	February-June, 1989
Classroom implementation begun (to be repeated annually)	
• Screening, assessment of participating children	August, 1989
• Program initiation in all classes	September, 1989
Monitoring initiated (repeated annually)	November, 1989
Collection of data for evaluation study begun (repeated annually)	June, 1990
Interim summative evaluation and policy recommendations presented	January, 1992
Summative evaluation, report, and recommendations presented	December, 1992

The outcomes of the program and its alternative delivery systems, as documented in the evaluation study, will form the basis for recommendations about continuing the program after FY 1993.

HOW WILL THE TWO DEPARTMENTS WORK TOGETHER ON THIS PROGRAM?

The departments view this initiative as one program with alternative approaches to providing the services to young children and their families. As such, the objectives, criteria for participation, and guidelines will be the same, regardless of which of these service models is adopted:

- a prekindergarten program in three sites, sponsored by the local board of education, with the necessary before- and after-school care also operated by the board or by a provider under board contract. (Primary responsibility for these sites resides in the Department of Education.)

- a prekindergarten program, together with the necessary child care, operated by a Head Start program in the public schools of two or three local districts. (A joint application from the local board and the Head Start program will be necessary, with management residing with either the local board or the Head Start. The Department of Human Services will have responsibility for these sites.)

The cooperative, coordinated approach required for this initiative will be guided by a formal interagency agreement and a joint management team, which will resolve issues that cross traditional agency responsibilities.

To assure that the local programs meet local needs and that they are appropriate for these young children and their families, the departments will establish an advisory council representing other state agencies and service providers. Further, the departments will seek the review and comment of appropriate existing state advisory groups (e.g., the State Child Care Advisory Council).

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